

Hemingway and Pound: Literary Friends, Wartime (Criminal?) Opposites

Which Was Indeed the Criminal?

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Ernest Hemingway is one of the most famous literary figures of all time and is regarded by many people as *the* American writer. He was an exceptional blend of literary talent and iconoclastic personality, whose persona has become deeply etched in the American popular consciousness.[\[1\]](#)

Hemingway wrote about the American poet Ezra Pound, “His own writing, when he would hit it right, was so perfect, and he was so sincere in his mistakes and so enamored of his errors, and so kind to people that I always thought of him as a sort of saint.”[\[2\]](#)

This article discusses the friendship that developed between these two American literary icons. It also discusses the dramatic divergence between their lives as a result of their respective actions during World War II, as well as the mental illnesses they allegedly developed in their later years.

Friendship

Hemingway at first misjudged Ezra Pound when they met in Paris in 1922. Pound’s open-throated shirt, unclipped goatee, and the showy blue-glass buttons on Pound’s jacket convinced Hemingway that Pound was a colossal fake. However, Hemingway soon realized that Pound was a far more generous and complex person than he had originally assumed.[\[3\]](#)

Both Hemingway and Pound were passionately devoted to their art and admired each other’s work. Hemingway, who at this time of his life was both responsive to constructive criticism and intensely interested in the techniques of poetry and prose, came to Pound as a pupil. Pound was the first significant writer to recognize Hemingway’s talent, and he did everything he could to help Hemingway achieve success.[\[4\]](#)

Pound introduced Hemingway to other writers, they played tennis together, they toured Italy in February 1923, and Hemingway even attempted to teach Pound how to box. Hemingway and his wife rented a flat in January 1924 to be near Pound’s home. Hemingway defended Pound in one of his early poems, and borrowed lines from one of Pound’s poems in two of his other poems.[\[5\]](#)

Hemingway praised Pound’s generosity, his character and his poetry in his book *A Moveable Feast*:

Ezra was kinder and more Christian about people than I was...Ezra was the most generous writer I have ever known...He helped poets, painters, sculptors and prose writers that he believed in and he would help anyone whether he believed in them or not if they were in trouble. He worried about everyone and in the time when I first knew him he was most worried about T. S. Eliot who, Ezra told me, had to work in a bank in London and so had insufficient time and bad hours to function as a poet.[\[6\]](#)

Hemingway was aware of his immense personal and artistic debt to Pound. Pound promoted Hemingway ceaselessly in the 1920s, and by virtue of being one of the “founders” of modernism, Pound

assured Hemingway a place in the artistic forefront.^[7] Hemingway came to regard Ezra Pound as a lifelong friend.

Hemingway's War

Ernest Hemingway was an unabashedly patriotic and loyal American during World War II. By collaborating on the anthology *Men at War*, written in Cuba in 1942 and dedicated to his sons, Hemingway was contributing to the global war against fascism.^[8]

Hemingway also used his pleasure boat *Pilar* to become what he would call "a secret agent of my government." Hemingway and his crew patrolled the northern coast of Cuba in *Pilar* in search of German submarines, which in 1942 were sinking Allied ships in many parts of the Atlantic. The hope was that the Germans would see a fishing boat going about its business, and would come alongside to buy or seize fresh fish and water. The crew of *Pilar* would be ready to attack with bazookas, machine guns and hand grenades. While *Pilar* never encountered any German U-boats at close range, Hemingway took this project seriously and put his heart into the mission.^[9]

Hemingway was a war correspondent for *Collier's* magazine beginning in late May 1944. He was in Britain for the days leading up to the Allied invasion of Normandy, and was allowed to board one of the LCVPs (Landing Craft, Vehicle and Personnel) that pushed off a ship toward Omaha Beach. Hemingway was not allowed, however, to wade ashore himself. Regulations required that he stay in the landing craft and watch the fighting through his binoculars.^[10]

Hemingway continued to report on the war in France. He got great satisfaction from his participation in the war and was very popular among the Allied soldiers. Predictably, Hemingway bragged about the extent of his combat experience. He later claimed to have killed many Germans, and while he apparently killed some, he probably killed far fewer Germans than he claimed.^[11]

Allied military authorities were alarmed by reports that Hemingway had carried a weapon and engaged in combat in France. Hemingway was summoned by the inspector-general of the U.S. Third Army to a judicial investigation on October 6, 1944. Hemingway at this hearing had to downplay his military prowess in order to avoid being court-martialed.^[12]

Hemingway later wrote about crimes he committed during the war. Hemingway wrote in a letter to Charles Scribner dated August 27, 1949:

One time I killed a very snotty SS kraut who, when I told him I would kill him unless he revealed what his escape route signs were said: You will not kill me, the kraut stated. Because you are afraid to and because you are a race of mongrel degenerates. Besides it is against the Geneva Convention.

What a mistake you made, brother, I told him and shot him three times in the belly fast and then, when he went down on his knees, shot him on the topline so his brains came out of his mouth or I guess it was his nose.

The next SS I interrogated talked wonderfully.^[13]

In a letter to Arthur Mizener dated June 2, 1950, Hemingway wrote that he used his M1 to shoot a German youngster riding on a bicycle. Hemingway said the German boy was about the same age as his

son Patrick (then age 16).[\[14\]](#) Although Hemingway felt some remorse for this killing[\[15\]](#), he could never bring himself to say anything sympathetic to the Germans.

Hemingway wrote in his letters that he killed 122 Germans, including a captured German officer who would have been protected by the Geneva Convention.[\[16\]](#) While Hemingway was probably exaggerating the number of Germans he killed, it is notable that Hemingway openly bragged in writing about his war crimes without fear of retribution from the Allies.

Pound's War

Ezra Pound was an American citizen living in Rome at the time World War II broke out. Unlike Hemingway, Pound opposed US policy throughout the war. Acting upon his own volition, Pound received permission from the Italian government to make unpaid broadcasts from Rome. In February 1940, Pound was heard for the first time on the "American Hour," a program beamed to the United States by Radio Rome.[\[17\]](#)

Encouraged by the vigorous "isolationist" movement in America, Pound tried to return to the United States in the summer of 1941. The United States Embassy accused him of being an agent of Fascism and would not issue him a visa. Exiled in Italy, Pound continued his broadcasts and made about 75 radio broadcasts over Radio Rome before the United States entered the war.[\[18\]](#)

The Italian government became suspicious of Pound's motives and temporarily stopped him from broadcasting. The avant-garde expressions and slew of ethnic slang that Pound employed made the Italian secret service fear that he was sending messages in code to the U.S. armed forces. Barred from making his broadcasts, Pound decided to return to the United States. Pound and his wife Dorothy prepared to leave Rome on a diplomatic evacuation train early in 1942. However, American officials in Rome informed Pound that he was *persona non grata* with the United States government, and they refused to let him and his wife board the train.[\[19\]](#)

The Italian government eventually allowed Pound to make radio broadcasts again. He continued to make broadcasts strongly denouncing American involvement in the war, with his last broadcast occurring on May 3, 1945.[\[20\]](#) Eustace Mullins wrote about Pound:

In the midst of one of the most destructive wars in the history of mankind, Ezra Pound remained true to his calling. While 50 million human beings were dying by violence, he went down to Rome and read his poems over the international wireless. And, as he had been doing all of his life, he interspersed his poetry with blistering invective against politicians and usurers.

He was the only Bohemian of the Second World War. In a world gone mad, he continued to cry out, "Stop it! Stop it!" He has never raised his hand against another human being.

Pound was duly indicted for treason, but the chief complaint against him seems to have been that he refused to take part in the slaughter. While so many millions were dipping their hands in blood, he asked only for peace.[\[21\]](#)

On May 14, 1942, Pound broadcast "that there was a force inside the United States that was not only trying to bust up the Monroe Doctrine, not only trying to betray our tradition of keeping out of the European mess, but trying to start a war in order to get America into it." Pound repeatedly said that

international Jewish bankers controlled the democracies and had pushed for the assault on Germany.[\[22\]](#)

Pound Imprisoned

Pound was bound back to the United States and examined by four psychiatrists at St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. These psychiatrists recommended that Pound not be compelled to stand trial for treason because the pro-Fascist broadcasts he had made during the war were the work of a man who had gone insane. Pound, who had warned British and American citizens that Jewish propagandists had deceived them into entering the war against the Axis Powers, was declared insane because of his political opinions.[\[23\]](#)

Pound initially was confined in Howard Hall in St. Elizabeths Hospital. He was surrounded there by rapists and killers who had been adjudged criminally insane. Pound was shut away from daylight among men and women who sometimes screamed day and night, foamed at the mouth, or tried to choke one another. In this environment, it was not expected that Pound would survive very long. Fortunately, after over a year, protests from Pound's visitors enabled him to be transferred to a less-dangerous part of the hospital.[\[24\]](#)

Ezra Pound's wife Dorothy learned from the press that her husband was imprisoned in St. Elizabeths Hospital. Her funds were nearly exhausted when she arrived in Washington. U.S. officials promptly declared her an "enemy alien," although she had been married to Pound, an American citizen, for 42 years, and been of British nationality before that. As an enemy alien, Dorothy was not allowed to draw upon her savings in England. Hemingway and another poet advanced money to Dorothy to carry her through these difficult days.[\[25\]](#)

Dorothy Pound began a vigil that was to last for more than 12 years. She was allowed to visit her husband only 15 minutes each afternoon, and a guard was present during these brief meetings. A doctor explained this extra precaution by saying that Pound was under indictment for the most serious offense in American jurisprudence. Bail was denied to Pound, and he was forced to stay in St. Elizabeths against his will.[\[26\]](#)

Hemingway could not stand the thought of his old friend being locked up. When Hemingway received the Nobel Prize in Literature, he frequently mentioned Pound in the many remarks and interviews he made in the press. Hemingway told a *Time* reporter that Pound was a great poet and should be freed. In July 1956, Hemingway sent Pound \$1,000 and paid him a moving tribute, calling Pound "our greatest living poet" and "the man who taught me, gently, to be merciful and tried to teach me to be kind."[\[27\]](#)

Hemingway and some of Pound's other friends continued to campaign for Pound's release, and were instrumental in obtaining his release from St. Elizabeths Hospital in 1958. Although Hemingway never saw or wrote to Pound again, Hemingway continued to speak highly of his old friend.[\[28\]](#) Hemingway also gave Pound \$1,500 to help him relocate to another country.[\[29\]](#)

Final Years

Ezra Pound said to reporters on May 7, 1958, as he left St. Elizabeths Hospital, "All America is an insane asylum."[\[30\]](#) Pound returned to Italy, where he was not considered a traitor. His daughter Mary said

that it was always their plan to bring Pound to Italy after his imprisonment in St. Elizabeths so that Pound might have peace and write poetry.[31]

Pound continued to work on his poem the *Cantos*, which he had started many years previously. Unfortunately, Pound did not finish this epic poem. Some people say Pound hardly spoke in his last years.[32] However, poet Peter Russell spoke to Pound frequently in Pound's last years and says the myth of his absolute silence is sheer nonsense.[33] Pound died peacefully in Venice in 1972 at the age of 87.

Ernest Hemingway suffered from declining health in his later years. He had always been accident-prone. In addition to two serious concussions in World War II, he suffered from a serious accident on *Pilar* in 1950, as well as concussions in two successive plane crashes during a 24-hour period in January 1954. Hemingway was not exaggerating when he told the Nobel Committee that he could not travel to Stockholm to accept their award.[34]

Hemingway never fully recovered from these injuries. Friends and biographers of Hemingway say that 1954 marked the start of an irreversible downward spiral which was aggravated by various other illnesses and deep depression. Hemingway eventually saw doctors at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where he underwent electroconvulsive therapy for his depression. This therapy failed, and Hemingway ended his life by shooting himself with a double-barreled shotgun early in the morning on July 2, 1961.[35]

Conclusion

Ezra Pound was always sane and never should have been imprisoned in a mental hospital. He was imprisoned solely because he spoke out against the insanity of World War II. Peter Russell writes:

Apart from being the unique writer he was, he was a good all-rounder and had never had any social or personal difficulties that could not be considered normal. I gather that his comportment in St. Elizabeth's was such that he received the respect of all who knew him, save where there was a difference of opinion on political and social matters. My own view is that with time, Pound's basic ideas will be seen to be extremely sane, simple and even obvious. At the end of the war, I don't think many of us could see things clearly.[36]

By contrast, Ernest Hemingway eagerly took part in destroying Germany, even boasting of murdering a surrendered German soldier in violation of the Geneva Convention. Assuming Hemingway's braggadocio is true, he should have been convicted of murder. Happily, Hemingway and Pound remained lifelong friends despite their strongly divergent courses during the war.

Endnotes

[1] Hutchisson, James M., *Ernest Hemingway: A New Life*, University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016, p. 1.

[2] Hemingway, Ernest, *A Moveable Feast*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964, p. 108.

- [3] Lynn, Kenneth S., *Hemingway*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, pp. 162-163.
- [4] Meyers, Jeffrey, *Hemingway: A Biography*, New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985, p. 73.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- [6] Hemingway, Ernest, *A Moveable Feast*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964, pp. 108, 110.
- [7] Dearborn, Mary V., *Ernest Hemingway: A Biography*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017, p. 586.
- [8] Reynold, Nicholas, *Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy: Ernest Hemingway's Secret Adventures, 1935-1961*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017, p. 134.
- [9] *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136, 144.
- [10] Hutchisson, James M., *Ernest Hemingway: A New Life*, University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016, p. 192.
- [11] *Ibid.*, pp. 194-195.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- [13] Baker, Carlos (editor), *Ernest Hemingway Selected Letters 1917-1961*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981, p. 672.
- [14] *Ibid.*, pp. 697-698.
- [15] *Ibid.*, p. 697.
- [16] Nordbruch, Claus, *Bleeding Germany Dry*, Pretoria, South Africa: Contact Publishers, 2003, pp. 127-128.
- [17] Mullins, Eustace, *This Difficult Individual, Ezra Pound*, New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1961, pp. 202-203.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p. 203.
- [19] *Ibid.*
- [20] *Ibid.*, p. 236.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 201.
- [22] Pound, Ezra Loomis, "Ezra Pound Speaking", Westport, Conn.: Ezra Pound Literary Property Trust, 1978, pp. 130-131.
- [23] Lynn, Kenneth S., *Hemingway*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987, p. 163.
- [24] Mullins, Eustace, *This Difficult Individual, Ezra Pound*, New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1961, pp. 18-19.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- [26] *Ibid.*

[27] Dearborn, Mary V., *Ernest Hemingway: A Biography*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017, p. 587.

[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Reynolds, Michael, *Hemingway: The Final Years*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, p. 305.

[30] *Ibid.*

[31] Swift, Daniel, *The Bughouse: The Poetry, Politics, and Madness of Ezra Pound*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017, p. 255.

[32] *Ibid.*, pp. 256-258.

[33] Russell, Peter (editor), *An Examination of Ezra Pound*, New York: Gordian Press, 1973, p. 279.

[34] Reynold, Nicholas, *Writer, Sailor, Soldier, Spy: Ernest Hemingway's Secret Adventures, 1935-1961*, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017, pp. 223-224.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp. 225, 252-254, 260.

[36] Russell, Peter (editor), *An Examination of Ezra Pound*, New York: Gordian Press, 1973, p. 288.

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